

New Times Require Fresh Politics and Flexible Tactics

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A People's Victory

The main focus of this report is the new terrain of struggle. How could it be otherwise? So much is happening, so much is changing, so much is different – these are new times!

The Nov. 7, 2006, election was a people's victory. It was a stunning blow to the Bush Administration and the Republican Party, thus creating a far more favorable political terrain in the Congress and the country.

At the time I don't think we knew – and how could we – to what extent that terrain and the political balance of forces had shifted. Nevertheless, we said that the shift was significant. I don't remember using the term “turning point,” but the discussion went in that direction.

Now four months later we can be less tentative: isn't it obvious that things have changed dramatically? It is not too far off the mark to call it a sea change in political relationships.

What does a quick glance reveal? A sense of possibility is in the air. A movement is in motion, and the tempo of political life is picking up. The tables are turning – Congress is no longer a rubber stamp for Bush's policies, but instead is a site of real debate and sharp struggles. In two short months, meaningful legislation, including a minimum wage hike, the Employee Free Choice Act, a resolution against the escalation of the war, and only yesterday the spending bill that specifies a timetable and process for withdrawal from Iraq have passed in the House.

Although much remains to be done, only hopeless cynics or political dilettantes (unfortunately there are too many of them) would say that nothing new is afoot; that things haven't changed for the better. The prevailing mood is that the long, dark night of right-wing Republican rule is coming to an end.

At the same time, no one has forgotten that the right is still on the political scene and retains considerable power and muscle, so much so that we didn't make any change in our strategic policy at our last National Committee meeting.

And yet its power is far more circumscribed; the space for political and legislative initiative is far narrower; and its ideas, hatched in well-funded think tanks and promoted by the major media, are far, far less potent.

New Common Sense

In the new ideological environment, millions of Americans are inclined to embrace ideas like universal health care, redistributive economics, equality, a robust federal government and peace through diplomacy, while rejecting market solutions for every problem, a thinned down role for government, trickle down economics, and gross disparities in income and social status.

To borrow Antonio Gramsci's term, a new "common sense" that accents peace, justice, and decency and derived from painful experience and struggle over the past twenty-five years, is making its home in the minds of our multi-racial, multi-national, male-female working class and its allies.

If all of this wasn't enough, the Bush Administration's past sins – its scandalous neglect of veterans, politically motivated firings of US attorneys, the outing of CIA agent Valerie Plame, the conviction of Scooter Libby, and so on – are coming back to bite it.

Moreover, the whole story is still to be told. In coming months, the American people will hear about more layers of corruption, hypocrisy, sleaze, lying, double dealing, and above all, egregious abuses of power by this administration and its toadying supporters in the Congress.

Has Bush become the "emperor without any clothes?" Is his downward political spiral irreversible? Is the jig up? Not quite, but for sure, his game plan has been reduced to rearguard actions and retreat.

Bush spokespeople won't admit it, but on a global level, the administration is haltingly adjusting its foreign policy. Without fanfare, it has negotiated a nuclear weapons agreement with North Korea, sat in the same room with Iran and Syria, is rethinking its frosty relationship to Russia, and sent "the

emperor” himself to Latin America on a diplomatic mission. The neoconservative policy of domination on the basis of unrivaled force and power is giving way (though not fully) to a more traditional policy of hegemony based on a mixture of multilateralism, diplomacy, and consent along with hard power.

Of course, we don’t want to overstate this. As we know the Bush Administration is escalating the war in Iraq and has been considering military action against Iran for a while now.

Meanwhile on the domestic level, for all practical purposes, Bush has given up on any far-reaching policy initiatives.

His governing power has been reduced to stalling and blocking Democratic Party initiatives. With the assistance of the Republican congressional leadership, he has had some success. In the Senate where the Democratic majority is thin, the Republicans are holding up the passage of the minimum wage increase, employee free choice, anti war measures, and other things. And in the event that they fail to hold back the legislative tide, Bush says that he will use his veto power.

Of course, Republicans are aware that these blocking actions could come back to haunt them in 2008. So much so that divisions and recriminations are surfacing already. Support for the escalation is fragile. Fifty Republicans are opposing Bush’s signature domestic policy achievement, No Child Left Behind. And some Republican lawmakers are calling for the resignation of Attorney General Alberto Gonzales in defiance of Bush. Not coincidentally the first was New Hampshire Senator John Sununu who just happens to be up for reelection in 2008, as are 20 of Sununu’s colleagues. In the coming weeks and months expect more fractures and flight. At some point even loyalists jump from a sinking ship.

The Democratic Party, on the other hand, finds itself in a new position – the majority party in the Congress, which takes considerably more political imagination and tactical finesse than being a party of opposition. Political initiative is passing (not completely and fully) into its hands and the hands of the labor-led people’s movement of which we are a part.

What is more, the political center of gravity in the Democratic Party is shifting to center and progressive forces. A rough approximation of this shift

(emphasis on rough) is gleaned from a breakdown of House members. About 40 members consider themselves “Blue Dogs,” nearly double that number fall into the progressive category, and the rest are somewhere in between. In the Senate, the political disposition is more conservative, although even in the Senate the liberals are exercising greater influence.

So far the Democrats have acquitted themselves much better than many expected. Their “first 100 hours” campaign allowed them to focus on issues that resonated across the country, to assemble large majorities in the Congress, and to grab the initiative, while throwing the Republicans on the defensive, an unfamiliar posture for them after years of ruling with an iron fist.

For the most part, the labor-led people’s movement welcomed these initiatives without a trace of hesitation or cynicism. In doing so it demonstrated the same political resourcefulness that it exhibited in last fall’s election.

Will there be differences between this movement and the Democratic Party in the weeks and months ahead? No doubt, but its tack will be to pressure, nudge, and prod the Democrats with an eye to maintaining the coalition of center, progressive and left forces in the Congress and across the country.

Still Waiting to Be Born

The Democratic Party isn’t a people’s party, nor will it evolve into one. A people’s party embedded in and led by the core forces of a broad people’s coalition is still waiting to be born.

But the Democrats are not identical to the Republicans either. Conflating the two isn’t an accurate representation of reality nor tactically wise. To do so forecloses political openings and initiatives that allow the movement to make legislative gains.

Or to put it differently: to assume before the struggle has been even joined that the Democratic Party is no better and no different than the Republican Party is undialectical, analytically flawed, and demobilizing.

Thank goodness the CIO and its allies in the 1930s didn’t embrace this logic. Nor did the great revolutionary democrat, Martin Luther King, although he

easily could have, given the number of Dixiecrats at the time. King possessed a political and tactical genius that allowed him to discern and take advantage of openings and divisions in the Congress and ruling class, not to mention an unsurpassed ability to touch the hearts and the minds of tens of millions.

Of course, there are class and institutional pressures and constraints on the Democratic Party to be sure. It has no inclination to challenge the overall operation and logic of capitalism to be sure. But to leave the matter here betrays a lack of understanding of Marxist methodology. In analyzing a problem, Marxism moves from the general to the particular, from the abstract to the concrete. It studies a problem in a many-sided way and in all of its concrete manifestations and connections.

We can't make such an analysis now; time doesn't permit, but at the very least we can say that at the level of policy and social composition, the differences between the two parties are consequential to class and democratic struggles.

To go a step further, I would argue that when a people's party does emerge that is capable of contending for power, it will have to attract both a grouping of the Democratic Party's elected representatives as well as a substantial section of the constituency that currently hangs its hat there. And to go still another step further, I can't imagine that such a party will refuse to join hands with the Democrats in all circumstances on the basis of some abstract principle.

“The divergences,” Lenin wrote in *Left Wing Communism*, “between the Churchills and the Lloyd Georges ... on the one hand, and between the Hendersons and the Lloyd Georges on the other, are quite unimportant and petty from the standpoint of pure, abstract communism ... but from the standpoint of practical mass action, these differences are very, very important. The whole point, the whole task of the Communist ... is to take these differences into account ... The strictest loyalty to the ideas of communism must be combined with the ability to make all the necessary practical compromises, to maneuver, to make agreements, zigzags, retreats and so on, so as to accelerate the coming to power and subsequent loss of political power of the Hendersons.”

That's food for thought in these new times. And while it won't be easy to undo the damage done during the long period of right-wing political dominance, of which the Bush years are the latest and worst, it won't be done without dialectics, broad and flexible tactics, and political soberness.

Seizing the Moment

So the questions before us are: What is the main arena of struggle? What are the main organizations and coalitions leading these struggles? What are the main issues? To what degree do the struggles and coalitions overlap?

And within this context, what is our Party's role? What is our tactical policy in conditions that are decidedly different than a year ago? And how do we build the influence and size of the Party and our press?

To begin, the main arena of struggle is the 110th Congress. We made this point last November and everything that has occurred since confirms it. Nearly all social organizations and movements are directing their attention, resources, and constituency to the Congressional arena.

It has been a long time since Congress has been an arena of struggle where the labor-led people's movement not only could bring their legislative demands, but also stood a chance of securing majorities for those demands. But they do now.

Since January, millions have participated in a range of actions aimed at Congress.

Core Forces

To no one's surprise, the coalition of forces – labor, people of color, women, seniors, and youth – behind last November's victory is walking with more bounce to its step. Legislative conferences and lobbying are becoming routine. Internet organizing is standard fare of every mass organization. And mass actions are in the works, although the most dramatic was the January 27 march and lobby organized by United for Peace and Justice.

The labor-led people's movement of which we speak is as much an expression of a political direction as it is a political reality. In the past, the

main forces of this coalition organized along parallel lines. And this will continue to be the case as we go forward. But we should also note the pronounced tendency to coalesce with other organizations and to reach out to non-traditional constituencies. It is not yet a “grand coalition” with a formal structure and specific program, and it may never be, but this cross-pollination and overlapping of issues and organizations, this reaching out to new forces, this search, born of necessity, for new forms of unity, is exceptionally important.

In addition to traditional organizations such as the AFL-CIO, NAACP, NOW, Mexican American Political Association, Rainbow/PUSH, National Council of La Raza, Coalition of Black Trade Unionists, Peace Action, and so on, this loose coalition includes a new network of progressive, liberal, peace, and other organizations. Some of them are single-issue organizations with a homogenous constituency; others are multi-issue and bridge different constituencies and organizations.

Furthermore, magazines like *The Nation*, TV and radio shows hosted by Tavis Smiley, Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert, and Keith Olbermann, musicians and artists too numerous to mention, and political personalities like Jesse Jackson, Katrina vanden Heuvel, and Barbara Ehrenreich bring a progressive message to a mass audience.

And let’s not forget the new role of the Internet as a source of alternative news and mass organizing. No one has done the latter better than MoveOn. I hear criticism of MoveOn of late – and perhaps some criticism is warranted – but what really strikes me is the positive role that they play, both in past and current struggles. They combine good political positions with flexible tactics, something that is sorely needed in today’s circumstances.

What are we to make of all this? In my opinion, the formation of a progressive political coalition and culture with its own organizations, institutions, media networks, cultural forms, traditions, and historical memory is taking shape. The 1930s had such a coalition and culture, but it fell victim to the Cold War; the 1960s had one too, not as full-blooded as the earlier period, but significant nonetheless, but it exhausted itself and gave way to the right-wing counteroffensive in the late 1970s.

Today’s incipient progressive political coalition and culture is of great importance. It has to be nurtured and further developed by everyone who

falls under its umbrella. Unlike in the '60s, the labor movement is big part of it. It goes without saying that communists will assist this multi-faceted, multi-leveled, multi-form progressive coalition and culture at every turn.

Labor to the Front

Initially, my intention was to discuss each of the core forces of the people's coalition, but because of time I am only going to say a few words about the labor movement. In the near future, however, we should assess the role of the other core forces as well.

In April, our National Board is planning a major discussion of the African American people and their struggle for equality, to be followed by a conference, sponsored by the African American commission and hosted by the Missouri District. We should organize similar discussions of the Mexican American and other nationally and racially oppressed peoples, women, and youth. The aim would be twofold: first to make a political assessment of these communities and the movements, and then to discuss our role.

Labor emerged from the 2006 elections with new confidence and fresh energy, having increased its mobilization of rank and file members and the union and union family vote. The unions further developed their own independent political apparatus and were essential in the overall campaign to change Congress.

This earned labor the respect of the Democratic Party, as well as implacable enemies on the right and in the corporate world. The National Association of Manufacturing, the Chamber of Commerce and their ilk are channeling millions of dollars to defeat labor's key demands in Congress – raising the minimum wage, fixing the Medicare drug benefit, demanding national health care, ending the war in Iraq, and fair trade, not free trade. Of course they are frantic to defeat the Employee Free Choice Act.

It is a real sign of labor's newly won clout that the Democrats in the new Congress adopted so much of its program.

The March 2007 AFL-CIO Executive Board meeting in Las Vegas reflected this new energy and thinking. In fact, the meeting was a turning point in labor's evolution, a process whose origins we trace back to the early 1980s.

At the meeting, advanced positions were adopted on national health care, ending the war in Iraq, moving toward trade policies that target the transnational corporations instead of foreign workers, and developing deeper ties with the core constituent groups of the all-people's front.

And, perhaps most importantly, an innovative plan on how labor will participate in the 2008 elections was adopted. The plan reaches far down into the rank and file, further develops labor's independent role, and puts issues at the heart of its election work.

It is also important to note that the struggles around the 2006 elections and the current legislative agenda have deepened labor's unity. The AFL-CIO and Change to Win forged a common approach to defeating the ultra-right in Congress and are working together on legislative priorities, especially Employee Free Choice. Our labor activists report new, important expressions of unity and co-operation, especially at the local level.

An important indicator of labor's new energy, creativity, and unity was evident in Chicago's February municipal elections. The Chicago Federation of Labor and SEIU worked out a careful plan of building alliances with other key constituencies. They got involved early in the selection of candidates. In addition to lending all-out support for independent candidates important to other core constituencies, labor ran five candidates of its own. Four of these union candidates are African-American and three are women. One union candidate won outright and the other four are in run-off elections in April. Two of these are expected to win.

Regardless of the outcome, clearly this is a new day in Chicago. A new independent block in the City Council will be the base for building an even more powerful, labor-led front against big business and the developers.

Thus, labor continues to move in a progressive and class struggle direction. And it is doing this with its core allies. At a recent organizing conference involving both AFL-CIO and CTW unions, speaker after speaker stressed that labor could not just ask for community support, but had to become champions of its allies' programs and demands.

Of course, plenty of examples of backwardness and problems remain, but the main trends are good and getting better. More and more labor sees itself

and the core allies as partners and leaders in a people's movement that challenges transnational capital and fights for the interests of the whole working class.

Lastly it is important for us to be aware that on the economic front, this year will be a tough one for labor. For example, the UAW will be negotiating with the Big Three automakers in what will most likely prove to be some of the toughest negotiations in years. Big business and the right wing are out to punish the unions for the 2006 elections. They are on the offensive to cut health care, roll back retirees' gains, cut wages, dump pensions, gut Social Security and shift more jobs overseas. And all this takes place in a worsening economic situation overall.

Indeed, the puncturing of the housing bubble is beginning to be felt in the economy much like the bursting of the stock market bubble did years ago, but in contrast to the stock market bubble, whose effects were mitigated by the expansion of the housing market, nothing remotely like that appears in the offing this time. In fact, the context is an economy that has enormous imbalances and instabilities – unstable dollar, trade and government deficits, consumer indebtedness, and so forth – which will interact to one degree or another with a slowing economy and collapsing housing market.

Issues of Struggle

At the last NC meeting, we singled out some issues for special focus, namely ending the occupation of Iraq, union rights, health care, and immigrant rights.

The Employee Free Choice Act passed in the House by a substantial margin. The passage of this bill is of strategic importance to the working class and democratic forces generally. Imagine how different the political landscape would be if, say, 40 per cent of the working class were organized. Its impact would be transformative in that it would change in a positive way the balance of power in every arena of struggle.

Like the minimum wage bill, this bill is on hold for the time being, waiting to go to the Senate where resistance from the Republicans will be fierce. And if it passes, the Bush Administration is promising a veto.

We had planned a panel on how to campaign for EFCA at this meeting, but because it won't go to the Senate immediately, we decided to postpone it. However, we should get back to it soon. The task will be to engage in this struggle on every level, but our emphasis is to activate the base of the Party, to make every comrade a practical fighter for this elementary economic and democratic right. Approached broadly, it offers opportunities to deepen our local connections and build bridges between labor and the African American, Mexican American and other racially and nationally oppressed communities, women and youth, all of who stand to gain from strengthening the right to unionization.

Universal Health Care

The struggle for health care is probably the most urgently felt domestic issue. Poll after poll shows it. And all of us can have anecdotal evidence, or should I say, horror stories, that show how dire the situation is.

Many comrades are active in one or another aspect of this struggle, but given the new possibilities of making a breakthrough at the national and state level, we need to organize a national meeting to work out a common approach.

Without preempting that discussion, I think that it is obvious that we should work on different levels - national, state, and local; we should participate in a range of organizations, and we should have a positive attitude towards several bills at the federal and state level.

Of special importance – in fact, I would argue, a centerpiece – is HR 676, introduced by Congressman John Conyers. This bill is gathering broad support in the labor movement and could easily pick up supporters among the other forces – the African American, Mexican American, and other racially oppressed people, women, youth, seniors, the disabled and low income people. I'm not sure to what extent it is supported in Congress, but it offers a basis for broad left-center unity in labor and beyond. And this is not conjecture, but based on real initiatives that we have taken over the past period.

And here too, in addition to participating in national, state and city coalitions, we should also make our mark in this struggle in local unions and working-class neighborhoods. Although of course it will be not be possible

for every member and club to participate in this movement, many can and should, because it is an opportunity to deepen grassroots connections and influence.

Immigration

The issue of immigration will surely be on the Congressional agenda. The unsettled questions are when and what will be the nature of the legislation. We can expect a very contentious fight in any event.

While there is a growing consensus that comprehensive reform is necessary, there is far less agreement as to what that should look like. Bush has his plan, McCain has another; Kennedy has his plan and Flake has another. And the immigrant rights and labor federations aren't of a single mind either, although they are not completely happy with even the best of the proposed legislation.

There is a growing labor-community fight back against factory and neighborhood raids. The Latino community is insisting on a moratorium on raids and deportations. A new sanctuary movement is developing.

The raids are clearly attempts to repress the movement that produced huge mass actions and solidarity demonstrations a year ago, as well as to divert attention away from issues like the war, labor rights, and health care.

Though there is growing opposition to the raids, especially from immigrants themselves and the Mexican American community, it is not nearly commensurate to the terror and suffering visited on undocumented workers. The participation of labor and other democratic forces needs to be greater than it currently is. Broad solidarity in defense of immigrant workers is in the self-interests of the working class and the entire progressive movement. It will strengthen every struggle and positively spill over into the 2008 elections.

And let's not forget that the extreme right is looking for a presidential candidate who will get "tough" on immigrants. The right sees immigration as an important mobilizing and wedge issue in next year's elections.

Last year we established a general approach to immigrant rights, which served us well. I see no reason to change that, for the time being anyway. It

includes full rights for the undocumented, an easy path to citizenship, the demilitarization of the border, and opposition to a guest worker program, among other things.

Ending the Iraq War

The other issue of struggle that we highlighted at our last National Committee meeting was the Iraq war. In fact, because of the dynamics of the struggle, which we don't control, it has been and will continue to be our principal focus. But we aren't alone. It is an item of conversation in most homes and workplaces, not to mention the Congress. Everyone is staking out a position.

Bush's war policy is not going well in Iraq or at home. In Iraq, the Maliki government seems almost as beleaguered as the Bush Administration, commanding little authority among either Shiites or Sunnis. The security environment seems no better. Even a recent Pentagon paper admits that a civil war is taking place. Innocent people continue to be killed and maimed. The armed insurgents have morphed from mainly former Baathists to a combustible mix of competing sectarian groups. And the menacing and unwelcome presence of U.S. occupation troops, never a force for stability to say the least, only makes a political and diplomatic solution less likely.

While the withdrawal of U.S. troops will create more favorable conditions for a political solution to the country's turmoil, there are no guarantees that a solution will be found in the short run. It is possible that the civil war has reached a point of no return and will have to run its course. At the same time, the claim by Bush that the whole Middle East will explode is farfetched and self-serving.

At home Bush's war policy finds few supporters. The administration would be in a full-scale retreat, but for the support of most Republicans in the Senate and House.

In the short term this tactic may work, but in the longer term the Republican Party is probably shooting itself in the foot. Why? Because voters will punish GOP candidates at the ballot box in 2008.

Thus this support could quickly evaporate as we enter the election season, and the election season begins early these days. *This gives the anti-war movement leverage to move some Republicans into the anti-war camp, which is absolutely necessary, given the balance of forces in Congress.* As I mentioned earlier, 21 Republican Senators are up for re-election.

Some of the peace forces are mindful of this fact, but other sections have a nearly singular focus on the Democrats, as if they are the main prosecutor of, and the main obstacle to ending, the war.

Actually, the Democrats want to end the war, but they are not of one mind as to how to do it, which shouldn't be surprising. Not everybody represents Berkeley, Detroit, Cleveland, Madison, South Central Los Angeles, the Upper West Side of Manhattan or Cambridge, MA, where anti-war sentiments are strongest; not everybody is in the Out of Iraq or Progressive Caucus, in fact, as I indicated earlier, most aren't. I wish they were, but we have to deal with reality, we have to deal with things as they are, not how we wish they would be.

Nevertheless, what is noteworthy is that a majority of Democrats in the House and Senate are agreed that a timed and orderly withdrawal is necessary. I can't think of anything more important to setting in motion a different dynamic with respect to the war and our nation's overall foreign policy.

In the House vote March 23, a vast majority of Democrats joined by two Republicans supported the supplementary spending bill that included an amendment stating among other things that U.S. military forces would withdraw by 2008.

This is a victory, in fact, a major victory, although not everyone sees it this way. On the one hand, the majority of the American people who oppose the war for one or another reason as well as the main organizations of the working class and people, consider it an important step forward. Of the people who participated in a MoveOn poll, for example, 84.6 per cent voted to support the legislation.

On the other hand, some left and peace organizations actively campaigned against it, including UFPJ, Code Pink, Peace Action, and others.

In addition, eight members of the Out of Iraq Caucus opposed the legislation.

In somewhat different form, a bill has been introduced in the Senate where it will face difficult sledding [*note: a version of the bill passed the Senate on March 29, 2007*], and of course Bush has already promised a veto.

Are there problems with the bill? Of course – there is new funding for the Afghanistan war, there is no provision preventing a military action against Iran, the oil proposals are problematic, and above all, the purpose of the bill is to appropriate more billions for the war.

Nevertheless, our National Board was convinced that the bill, despite these weaknesses, merited full support. Let me explain why.

Generally speaking, we support all the measures to end the war drive of the Bush Administration, but what distinguishes this bill is that it stands a chance of garnering a majority in the Congress. At the moment, none of the other anti-war measures has that potential.

What is more, in the estimate of the National Board and the People's Weekly World Editorial Board, the shortcomings in the bill don't trump the importance of setting a date to withdraw troops.

Passage of this bill gives legal form to the desire of the American people, expressed at the ballot box and in numerous polls, to set a timetable for withdrawal from Iraq. It further isolates the Bush Administration while at the same time putting Republicans and their presidential candidates in a quandary. And it creates a new political dynamic to the end the war.

If it passes in the Senate and Bush vetoes it, every question – funding, Iran, and so – will surface in a new way and in a new light.

Let's face facts: don't think that if the House bill had been defeated, some better bill would have come along in the foreseeable future. Don't think that Congress would have seamlessly moved on to more advanced pieces of legislation. Don't think that the American people in their majority would up the ante and insist on cutting funds for the war.

In fact, if this bill had failed, it would have made it more difficult to win other anti-war measures and may well have postponed the withdrawal of troops to some date after the 2008 elections.

Conversely, the passage of the bill gives new leverage to win other pieces of anti-war legislation. To think otherwise is a dangerous illusion.

We should send out a communication urging the Party membership to press the Senate to pass their version of the bill.

Higher Math

Politics is not simple arithmetic. It is more akin to higher mathematics. Making a judgment about legislation, or a strike, or an election isn't done by simply adding up the plusses and minuses – at least not by Communists. We take into account the political situation and context, the balance of forces, and the dynamics and direction of the struggle.

In the 2006 elections, we didn't have any illusions about the Democrats, but we understood that taking control of Congress out of Republican hands would create a new political terrain of struggle. If anyone still doubts that, imagine what the situation would be if the Republicans had maintained their majority in the Senate and House. For one thing, these tactical issues that we are grappling with now would be a figment of our imagination. For another thing, neither the minimum wage bill nor employee free choice would have made it to the floor. For still another thing, HR 676 would be effectively mothballed, and finally, there would be no hearings about the abuses of power and lies of the Bush Administration.

I feel much the same way about the passage of this bill as I did about the Congressional elections: it changes the dynamics of the struggle.

We can acknowledge the serious shortcomings and dangerous language in the bill, but we shouldn't do it in a way that detracts from its overall political significance and impact. We shouldn't damn it with faint praise. Such damning gives the critic a feeling of righteousness and earns him or her some applause, but it doesn't solve a very difficult tactical problem, nor does it get us a flea hop closer to ending the war.

We as well as others have to find better and more skillful ways of combining partial with more advanced demands. Ending the war has to be bipartisan; the aim should be to win Republicans as well as centrist Democrats, but that won't happen without well-considered and flexible tactics.

Not everyone on the left and in the peace movement will agree with our position. Some of these same people and organizations were critical of our position on the elections, but to our credit we stated our policy as clearly as we could and then applied it consistently. We should do the same in this case.

At the same time, we should be respectful of the position of the peace and social forces that lined up on the other side. We should also acknowledge that the peace movement played a role in helping to bring about this new set of circumstances.

One final thing before moving on, some comrades ask if our current position is at loggerheads with the resolution passed at our last convention calling for immediate withdrawal. I don't think so. The resolution that we passed nearly two years ago was never intended to box us in or to fence us off from responding to new conditions on the ground. In fact, I said as much in my report to that same convention. What is more, at subsequent meetings of the National Committee, we agreed that a flexible approach to the issue of withdrawal was imperative.

Our National Committee is empowered to adapt our convention decisions to changing circumstances. It is not a passive receptacle that mechanically and mindlessly applies convention decisions, irrespective of changes in concrete circumstances.

In the afternoon we are going to discuss our work in the struggle for peace, but I do want to say briefly that we should examine to what degree we are participating in the struggle at the grassroots – in neighborhoods and workplaces. While I don't know the answer to this question, I do know that there is much more that we could do to activate every member and every club. How many resolutions, for example, have we introduced into local unions and central labor councils? The AFL-CIO's call for rapid withdrawal unlocks the door for unions across the country to become a part of the organized opposition to the war.

Or to come at the matter from another angle, how many neighborhood clubs have hosted vigils, for instance? Where we have, the response has been beyond our expectations. In some cases, ongoing actions and new friends have come out of it.

At any rate, there are plenty of ways to engage this struggle at the club level. And that should be a primary concern of every leader and member of our Party, which leads me to my next subject, namely, our role.

The Role of the Communist Party

To begin with, our role depends to no small degree on a sound strategic policy. When we are equipped with a sound strategic policy – and we are – we make substantive, if not decisive, contributions.

At the same time, we have to adjust our role to the new conditions of struggle. On every issue of struggle that I mentioned earlier it is feasible to think that coalitions of a broader character than anything we've seen in decades can be assembled. Thus, our role in these struggles and organizations is to assist and lead them. And its corollary is that we don't do it by ourselves, we don't do it alone, but with other left and center forces at this stage and subsequent stages of struggle.

In fact, at this stage in an overall sense we assist more than lead and the same could be said about the left in general. Although the situation is fluid, the main leadership comes from center and progressive forces. As the struggle gains in intensity, as the relations between forces within the broader movement change, and as we deepen our involvement and grow in influence and size, our leadership function will become larger.

At a moment like this our role isn't to come up with some issue that nobody else is thinking of and then organize a campaign around it through a new organizational form of which we are the identifiable leaders. Rather, our role is realized in the course of our participation in existing struggles and movements. We don't have to bowl alone.

In saying this, we aren't closing the door on initiative. But our accent is on initiative within the larger mix. After all, a dense network of organizations has taken shape and affords us opportunities to engage in and give leadership to many struggles. In both the peace and labor movement, for

example, we see an abundance of forms of organization in which communists are welcomed and actively participate.

In the midst of these struggles, we have to combine different levels of struggle and kinds of demands – not an easy task. It is as much an art as a science. And probably most of us would say that we haven't perfected that art yet.

And most importantly, we have to build the Party and press in the course of struggle as well as assist the ongoing evolution of the working class into the political leader – ideologically and practically – of the broader movement.

Finally the struggle for unity – working-class unity, multi-racial unity, and male-female unity in the first place – is a core element of our role. A divided movement can't decisively defeat the right at this stage nor can it achieve victories at subsequent stages. Of strategic significance is the alliance of labor and the African American, Mexican American, and other nationally and racially oppressed people. Much the same could be said about labor's alliance with women.

That unity, however, is solidified to the degree that labor is a full and leading force in the fight for racial and gender equality. We are not yet living in the post-civil-rights era nor have women achieve the same status of men in our society. Progress has been made to be sure and labor is moving to the front in this struggle, but much earth is still to be tilled. The struggle for equality is not only a necessary prerequisite to winning at this stage and every subsequent stage of struggle, but also in the self and class interests of the entire working class and people.

Tactics

At our November 2006 NC meeting we said that our tactical policy has to change to adjust to the new situation, and though we have been making that adjustment, I thought it might be useful to say some additional words on this subject.

Tactics are not pulled out of a grab bag; nor is their purpose to make someone feel righteous or to demonstrate one's revolutionary temper. They aren't intended to upstage or outsmart others with whom we work.

Instead, they are constituted with an eye to activating the core forces, to drawing in new social forces to struggle, and to deepening and extending unity, in particular, multi-racial, multi-national working-class unity. Or to put differently, they facilitate quantitative changes in the balance of class and social forces that, accumulatively, bring about changes of a qualitative, strategic nature in the political balance of power.

Tactics register and adjust to small changes in the balance of forces as well as bigger changes in the tempo, direction, and nature of the struggle. Thus tactical adjustments can be slight or sweeping. The changes that we are making in the aftermath of last year's elections, for example, fall somewhere in between.

Tactics embrace issues, slogans, demands, and forms of organization and struggle. They are time, place, and circumstance sensitive.

A tactical policy takes into close account the sentiments and moods of masses, both the politically active and passive.

“... We must not regard,” Lenin wrote, “what is obsolete for us as being obsolete for the class, as being obsolete for the masses. Here again we find that the “lefts” do not know how to reason, do not know how to conduct themselves as the party of the class, as the party of the masses. You must not sink to the level of the masses, to the level of the backward strata of the class. That is incontestable... But at the same time, you must soberly observe the actual state of class consciousness and preparedness of the whole class (not only of its Communist vanguard), of all the toiling masses (not only of its advanced elements).”

At the same time, tactics are anchored in a strategic policy that captures the main trends and tasks of political development.

To quote Lenin again:

“... We in Russia have been convinced by long, painful and bloody experience of the truth, that revolutionary tactics cannot be built up on revolutionary moods alone. Tactics must be based on a sober and strictly objective estimation of all the class forces in a given state as well as of the experience of revolutionary movements.”

And on another occasion, he said,

“Our left communists, however, who are also fond of calling themselves proletarian communists ... are incapable of giving thought to the balance of forces, to calculating it. This is the core of Marxism and Marxist tactics, but they disdainfully brush aside the core with proud phrases.”

While tactics are dependent on a sound strategic policy and an exact estimate of the balance of political forces, the practical application of that policy owes a debt back to tactics, which are an adaptive tool that fits the policy to concrete circumstances. Sound tactics give a strategic policy suppleness and elasticity.

Sound tactics also allow a movement to retreat as well as advance. It would be a wonderful world if the class and democratic struggles effortlessly moved from one victory to another, from one stage to the next, but the historical process isn't like that. Thus, every generation of activists and communists has to master the art of defensive as well as offensive struggles.

Tactics not only aim to activate and unify the core forces and their allies, but also to expose, weaken, and exploit any divisions within the opposing coalition of forces.

“The more powerful enemy,” our good friend Lenin said, “can be conquered only by exerting the utmost effort, and by thoroughly, carefully, attentively, and skillfully taking advantage of every, even the smallest, “rift” among the enemies, ... among the various groups of bourgeoisie ..., by taking advantage of every, even the smallest, opportunity of gaining a mass ally, even though this ally may be temporary, vacillating, unstable, unreliable, and conditional. Those who do not understand this do not understand even a particle of Marxism.”

This fundamental concept is unappreciated; too many see the ruling class as a unified, undifferentiated bloc.

The aim of tactics, or of poker for that matter, isn't to up the ante at every turn.

“Formerly many Communists,” said Georgi Dimitrov in his report the 7th Congress of the Communist International, “used to be afraid it would be

opportunism on their part if they didn't counter every partial demand of the Social Democrats by demands of their own which were twice as radical. That was a naïve mistake.”

In fact, the tactical point of departure for left-center unity and joint action is the most advanced demands of the center. That rule of thumb has served us well and will continue to do so as we go forward in this new political situation.

I only wish more sections of the progressive and left movement embraced this approach as well. Instead, they either make left demands the point of departure, or “damn with faint praise” proposals of center forces, as I mentioned earlier, or counterpose their own demands against less advanced demands.

The real task, however, is to combine partial demands that elicit broad support and are winnable in the near term with more advanced demands that are not yet supported by a broad enough constituency, but could be won in the course of ongoing struggles.

At the same time, while the most advanced demands of the center are a point of departure, they are not a final destination; while left-center unity is a concept of unity, it is also a concept of struggle.

The non-binding resolution against the escalation, for example, was a partial demand as is the appropriations bill that passed in the House yesterday. Their passage doesn't weaken the struggle for more advanced positions at all. Just the opposite – each is on a continuum of struggle.

Communist tactics are not primarily determined by a sense of moral outrage. We morally condemn in unmistakable terms the war in Iraq (and many other ills and crimes of imperialism, for that matter!), but we would make a mistake if we flesh out our strategic and tactical policy for ending that war based on that indignation. As Carl Winter said to me on more than one occasion, “It is not enough to be right; we have to be right in such a way that moves the broadest currents of the movement into struggle.”

Nevertheless, some sections of the peace movement insist that because of the immorality of the war, any measures short of immediate pullout of US troops and defunding the war should be actively opposed.

In developing a tactical policy, we have to bring down the level of analysis to the ground floor, where politics is complicated and contradictory, where inches of advance may impact on the lives of millions. Some in the left and progressive movement make the mistake of constructing tactics on a high level of abstraction and generality.

Nothing better illustrates this point than the attitude of some progressive and left people toward the Democratic Party. They draw tactical conclusions on the basis of an abstract analysis of the Democrats, that is, both the Democrats and Republicans are parties of the capitalist class. On a general level of analysis that is the case, but an analysis that intends to draw some tactical guidelines of struggle toward the congressional arena can't stop there. It has to be more concrete.

We approach tactics from the standpoint of a being a party of a *whole class*, not a narrow group, not the movement, not one or another section of the class or people, but the whole working class constituting a majority of the population. This wide-angle approach gives our tactical policy breadth and flexibility

In a recent letter to the *People's Weekly World*, for example, the writer says that every anti-war activist he knows embraces the slogan, "Out Now," and that it's wrong for the paper to support anything less than that. But even if what the writer says is true, or to go a step further, even if the entire peace movement shares the same point of view, it can't be the main determinant of our tactics. Our point of departure must be an estimate of what millions are thinking, what they are ready to embrace, what they are ready to support. The sentiments of the people of Lubbock, Texas count as much as sentiments of the people in San Francisco, California in the political calculus out of which come our tactics at the national level.

The political struggle over tactics in this period will continue on the whole range of issues and struggles. Things are changing, but leftism persists. There is still a disposition even in our Party to raise the ante on every occasion, to think that our singular task is to agitate for advanced demands. After all, in our culture, few things are worse than being tagged a "right opportunist;" somehow, being called "left sectarian" just doesn't have the same sort of negative bite.

We should raise our differences over tactical choices in a constructive and principled way in the broader movement. Our positions may not be popular in some circles, but we will be doing the movement a service if we are forthright on these matters, a disservice if we are not. We can disagree with our friends without being disagreeable.

Finally, in thinking through tactics, we should remind people that a full course correction given the present balance of forces requires regaining the White House first of all and increasing the majority in the Senate and House. And furthermore, there is nothing wrong with entering this crucial fact into our political calculus as we elaborate tactics for the coming period.

Let me leave this section with another quote from Lenin,

“The greatest, perhaps the only, danger,” Lenin wrote in the wake of the Russian revolution, “to the genuine revolutionary is that of exaggerated revolutionism, ignoring the limits and conditions in which revolutionary methods are appropriate and can be successfully employed. True revolutionaries have mostly come a cropper when they began to write “revolution” with a capital R, to elevate “revolution” to something almost divine, to lose their heads, to lose their ability to reflect, weigh and ascertain in the coolest and most dispassionate manner at what moment, under what circumstances, and in which sphere of action you must act in a revolutionary manner, and at what moment, under what circumstances, in which sphere, you must turn to reformist action. True revolutionaries will perish only if they abandon their sober outlook and take into their heads that the great, victorious, world revolution can and must solve all problems in a revolutionary manner, under all circumstances and in all spheres of action.”

Building the Party and Press

Libero Della Piana is going to speak to this question in his report, so I will be brief. To grow the Party and press will take a sustained effort on the part of our leadership – starting with the members of the National Committee. We just can’t go another long stretch with stagnant membership and press readership growth. And no one should be thinking it’s somebody else’s job. For growth to happen, and it must, we in this room have to be in thick of it.

I’m sure all of us are becoming convinced that we can grow incrementally and steadily in this period. So how do we do it? Part of it is shaking off the

hesitancy and psychology of another era. And the other part is to appreciate – and I think we do – that we really are living in new times.

Working people's mood, spirit and energy are up. They are in motion. And they are looking for radical, but realistic, ways to fight and struggle, which is where we come into the picture.

There is no other left organization in this country that mixes radicalism and realism as well as we do.

So what will it take to build the Party and our press? One necessary thing is a little bit of success. No speech, no matter how masterful and militant, is half as compelling as a few new recruits and a few new subs.

Some modest breakthroughs in recruiting and press building, I believe, will change the atmosphere in our Party. A little growth is the best antidote to our culture of low expectations and hesitancy when it comes to building the Party and press. Real live new people are facts on the ground. They are the most persuasive propaganda for a new approach to party and press building in this period. New recruits not only enhance what we can do, but they transform how we think.

John Rummel put this idea in my head on a recent trip to Michigan and I am convinced that he is right. He mentioned that they are eyeing a small pool of potential new members and are organizing events to bring them to.

If they are successful, he says, and I agree with him, it will make a big difference in the confidence of the membership and leadership in the Party. It will change how they see the possibilities for growing the Party and press. I think that is probably the case elsewhere as well.

Will this happen? Again, it really depends on all of us in the room. We have to be the difference-makers; we have to set the train in motion; we have to be the Party-builders and press-builders in our clubs. I'm sure we will.